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VIRGIL IN THE AGE OF ELIZABETH¹

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No period in English literature has been more distinctly romantic than the age of Shakespeare. The spirit of the times is admirably expressed in these words of Mulcaster, who was, it will be remembered, the schoolmaster of Edmund Spenser: "I love Rome, but London better. I favor Italy, but England more. I honor the Latin, but I worship the English."² The new spirit had crept into the universities. In 1580 Gabriel Harvey writes of Cambridge in terms that to us, somehow, sound strangely modern: "Tully and Demosthenes nothing so much studied as they were wonte; Livy and Sallust possibly rather more than less. Lucian never so much. Aristotle much named but little read. . . . The French and Italian, when so highly regarded of scholars? The Latin and Greek when so lightly?" Nevertheless, if something of the former reverence for Latin and Greek had departed—the pessimistic wail of such a thoroughgoing classicist as Harvey need never be taken too seriously—the study of the classics was still the basis of all education, still the gate to learning. Queen Elizabeth herself, to use the words of one of her courtiers, spoke Latin "readily, justly and even critically";³ and her translations from Plutarch, Horace, and Boethius may be read in the publications of the Early English Text Society. Under the patronage of the court the position of such scholars as Sir John Cheke and Roger Ascham was by no means without distinction; and there was much interest in classical learning throughout the kingdom.

Latin, not English, was taught in the schools. Virgil was often included in the curriculum; and seems to have been used in the fifth

¹ Paper read before the Classical Association of New England at Hartford, Conn., April 2, 1910.

² Quoted by Spingarn, *Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, 296.

³ Roger Ascham in Nichol's *Progresses of Queen Elizabeth*. For the entire passage see Courthope, *History of English Poetry*, II, 129, 130.

year of Latin study.¹ To be sure, Mantuan, the "good old Mantuan" of Holofernes, was often read in place of the *Eclogues*; and Ascham in the *School-master* prefers Varro, Sallust, Caesar, and Cicero to Lucretius, Catullus, Virgil, and Horace, because he wishes his pupils to be trained in oratory and history and not in the epic and lyric. But Buchanan, the great humanist of Scotland and himself a pedagogue, has in one of his Latin poems the picture of a teacher, rising at five in the morning to wield the flog in one hand, and the Virgil in the other, flogging and correcting all day long.³ In Sir Philip Sidney's masque, the *Lady of May* (1578), there is a typical Renaissance pedant, the forerunner of the tiresome Holofernes. His name is Rombus and his appellation, "good Latin fool."⁴ Some of his misquotations are from Virgil; they certainly imply that the poet was mouthed in his school.

Parcare subjectos et debillire superbos;
Haec olim memonasse iuebit,

are only a few of his exclamations, which reach a worthy grammatical climax in "O Tempori! O Moribus!" Since the masque was written for the queen and performed before the court at the earl of Leicester's splendid mansion, Sidney must have had confidence in the ability of the gay ladies and their knights to appreciate jests at the expense of the classics. A yet more clear indication of the fact that Virgil occupied an important place in the classical reading of the time is found in the quaint introduction to a translation of the *Georgics* made in 1589 by one A. F., probably Abraham Fleming: "The translator's intent considered [namely, to do some good for grammar schools] the lesse checke should redounde to this honest and painefull translation; where in the expositor hath been carefull to satisfy the courteous." He proceeds to say that he intends to please himself, to delight his readers, but above all to use "plaine words applied to blunt capacities, considering the expositor's drift to consist in delivering a direct order of construction for the release of weak Grammatists, not in attempting

¹ Cf. W. S. Baynes, "What Shakespeare Learned at School," *Fraser's Magazine*, XX, N.S. (1879-1880), 617-19.

² Gregory Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I, 36.

³ Saintsbury, *The Earlier Renaissance*, 56.

⁴ *Miscellaneous Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Gray, 268-69.

by curious device and disposition to content courtly Humanists."¹ All this euphuism implies that Fleming's real object is to extend the knowledge of one of his favorite books among those who had small Latin and less Greek.

That such material as the works of Virgil afforded was welcomed by Elizabethan readers, the number of the translations of Virgil attests.² In 1553 a version of the complete *Aeneid* by Gawin Douglas was printed; it is this version which Sackville made use of in his *Induction*. The earl of Surrey in 1557 introduced blank verse to the English by his translation of books ii and iv of the *Aeneid*. One of the most popular of the Elizabethan versions was that of Thomas Phaer made in the fourteen-syllable ballad measure which was used later in Chapman's *Homer*. Phaer had translated the first seven books in 1558 and the first nine books by 1562; in 1573 the work was completed by Dr. Twyne, and the version of Phaer and Twyne, reprinted in 1583, 1584, 1596, and 1600, had a high reputation and received commendation from William Webbe in his *Discourse of English Poetry* (1586).³ In 1582 Richard Stanyhurst translated the first four books of the *Aeneid* into English hexameters; his work is of interest because it apparently derived its inspiration from Gabriel Harvey and the *Areopagus*, and is unique by reason of its curious orthography, which was a serious attempt at phonetic reform.⁴ The other works were not overlooked. The *Eclogues* were translated by Fleming in 1575 and in 1589, and the *Georgics* by the same author in 1589. Spenser paraphrased the *Culex* in his *Virgil's Gnat*, and Webb gives a translation of the first two eclogues into quantitative English verse. The list is doubtless incomplete; but so far as it goes, it shows that in the last half of the sixteenth century at least eleven translations from Virgil were printed, many of which were associated with some of the most interesting metrical experiments of the time. Even for a period that was so intensely interested in translation as was the Elizabethan age, the number of English versions of Virgil is significant, especially since very few Latin editions of the poet seem to have been printed in England during

¹ Quoted from the original edition in the Boston Public Library.

² Conington, *Miscellaneous Essays*, I, 137-46.

³ Arber reprint, 46.

⁴ Spingarn, *op. cit.*, 302.

the sixteenth century. The British Museum Catalogue gives only one, i.e., 1580. Very few of these translations lay claim to accuracy. The object of the translator in those days was to present the material in an attractive form and to extend acquaintance with his author.

There was likewise a genial handling of the classics and a gentlemanly willingness to quote from memory. Sidney himself, who was a good scholar and who ridiculed affected learning in the Malapropian excesses of his *Rombus*, quotes, if we may judge him strictly, but indifferently well; even the learned Bacon can be inaccurate. These facts may clear some difficulties as we pass to a consideration of Virgil in the works of Shakespeare. So much confusion has been created by the famous allusion to Shakespeare's classical attainments by Ben Jonson, that it may be well here to recall that without much doubt the greatest poet of our language was grounded in Latin at the grammar school of Stratford and that he could, and doubtless did, read Plautus in the original in later life. No one could write such a vivid school scene as that between Sir Hugh Evans and Master Page in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*,¹ unless he knew at first hand the trials of questions in accidence, and "understandings for thy cases and the numbers of the genders." Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that Shakespeare made his first appeal to the reading public, not through his plays but through poetical versions of well-known classical stories, *Venus and Adonis*, and *Lucrece*. That such a man should not have been interested in reading the one poet who was then regarded not only as the laureate of Rome but as the supreme poet of all literature is well-nigh incomprehensible. As a matter of fact, there are several indications in Shakespeare of a knowledge of Virgil, although no conclusive evidence that such knowledge was at first hand. The description of the painting of the Fall of Troy in *Lucrece* owes many of its details to the first and second books of the *Aeneid*.² The play actor in *Hamlet* is asked to recite a speech based on "Aeneas' tale to Dido and thereabout of it especially where he speaks of Priam's slaughter."³ In *Henry VI*, Part II, (III, ii, 114) Queen Margaret complains that she has tempted Suffolk's tongue

¹ Act IV, scene i.

² Ll. 1366 ff. Cf. introduction in *Cambridge Edition of Shakespeare*.

³ Act II, scene ii, 468.

To sit and witch me, as Ascanius did
 When he to madding Dido would unfold
 His father's acts commenced in burning Troy.

In the final scene of *Titus Andronicus*, Marcus bids his brother Lucius speak

as erst our ancestor
 When with his solemn tongue he did discourse
 To love-sick Dido's sad attending ear
 The story of that baleful, burning night
 When subtle Greeks surprised King Priam's Troy.

And above all in the moonlit scene of the *Merchant of Venice* we have the wonderful picture of the forsaken heroine:

In such a night
 Stood Dido with a willow in her hand
 Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love
 To come again to Carthage.

These are but a few, though perhaps among the most obvious, of the references to Virgil in Shakespeare. In each case the literary reminiscence and allusion seems to come from one who had read and appreciated the Roman poet. It is altogether misleading to try to prove from the passage in the *Merchant of Venice*, as some commentators would, that Shakespeare was no reader of the classics. Such comments come from those who not only know no poetry, but who are not even acquainted with the use made of classical writers by the poets of the Elizabethan age.

The debt of Edmund Spenser to Virgil is so large that only one or two phases of the question can here be discussed. The poems of the *Shepherd's Calendar* are based on the *Eclogues*; *Virgil's Gnat* is a paraphrase of the *Culex*; and many passages in the *Faery Queen* are derived from the *Aeneid*. The character of Arthur follows the usual Renaissance conception that saw in the person of Aeneas the model of the good governor and the virtuous man. But in his letter to Raleigh Spenser pays tribute to modern epics, citing by the side of the heroes of Homer and Virgil those of Ariosto and Tasso. Spenser's use of the Italian poets raises the interesting question of his possible indebtedness to Dante. For example, so excellent a critic as James Russell Lowell marked in his own private copy of Spenser's works two passages as from Dante that clearly follow Virgil much more

closely. Again, in Sackville's *Induction* many writers have professed to see imitation of the *Inferno*. To be sure, few questions in the study of Spenser are more perplexing. Dr. Paget Toynbee, the Dante scholar, writes thus of the possible use of the Italian poet: "As to Spenser if I were compelled to say Yes or No, I should say No; but I am still in doubt." But when it is recalled how slight was the knowledge of Dante in the England of Elizabeth, how wide was the use of Virgil, and how difficult it is to distinguish between a romantic imitation of Virgil and the influence of Dante, it is perhaps just as well to remember that to both Sackville and Spenser Virgil would be the natural and the most easily available model for poetry which depicts the scenes of the lower world.

But if it is often difficult in studying the poets of Shakespeare's time to distinguish between classical and modern sources, there is no doubt of Virgil's pre-eminence so far as the literary criticism of the age is concerned. Renaissance writers held the epic in high esteem; some critics, from Vida to Rapin, looked upon it as the highest form of poetry. The *Aeneid* was held to be the model for a proper epic. In some writers reverence for Virgil approached literary idolatry. Scaliger, for example, believed that Virgil had created another Nature of such beauty and perfection that the poet need not concern himself with the realities of life, but can go to the second Nature created by Virgil for the subject-matter of his imitation. "All the things which you have to imitate you have according to another nature; that is Virgil." Here, of course, are the roots of pseudo-classicism. Through the French and Italian critics this conception of Virgil's power came into English literature; and if the poet is used somewhat sparingly as a critical aid, mediaeval Maronism was still a potent faith, although it was tempered by Humanism.¹ Sidney's devotion is typical. He cites the *Sortes Virgilianae*; he asks if Nature or philosopher's counsels have ever brought forth such a virtuous man in all fortunes as Virgil's Aeneas; he condemns Spenser for the framing of his style in the *Shepherd's Calendar* to an old rustic language, "since neither Theocritus in Greek, Virgil in Latin, nor Sannazzaro in Italian did affect it"; he even commends Aeneas for obeying the god's commandment to leave Dido, "though not only all passionate kindness, but

¹ Gregory Smith, *op. cit.*, I, lxxvii.

even the human consideration of virtuous gratefulness would have craved other of him." Finally he conjures his readers to believe with Scaliger that no philosopher's precepts can sooner make you an honest man than the reading of Virgil; and he promises to those who love poetry that their souls shall be placed with Dante's Beatrice or Virgil's Anchises.¹ Sidney's comments on Homer, on the other hand, are for the most part perfunctory. To him Virgil is the supreme poet. But he is by no means blind to the merit of modern poetry. If he was imbued with the classic, he was appreciative of the romantic.

Many other writers of the time share Sidney's enthusiasm for Virgil. Thus Thomas Churchyard in some preliminary verses of the *Pithy, Pleasant and Profitable Works of Maister Skelton* (written 1568), mentions Marot, Petrarch, Dante, Homer, and Ovid, and concludes:

But Virgill won the fraes
And past them all for deep engyen,
And made them all to gaes
Upon the books he made.²

If Churchyard represents the tribute mediocrity, or worse, can pay, in the works of Francis Bacon there is abundant evidence of the worship given to Virgil by genius. The Roman is quoted often in the *Essays*; and some of his finest passages are set forth in the *Advancement of Learning*. Although the fact is too often overlooked, Bacon indeed was no mean literary critic, and in the second book of this work he pays a well-merited tribute to the *Georgics*. "Virgil . . . got as much glory of eloquence, wit and learning in the expression of the observations of husbandry, as of the heroical acts of Aeneas." And Bacon, in arguing that good government and learning agree, gives as proof that in the time of the first two Caesars, "which had the art of government in greatest perfection, there lived the best poet, Virgilius Maro."³

Yet no survey of Elizabethan criticism can fail to note that many of the best writers were beginning to appreciate both the intrinsic and the relative worth of poetry written in their own day. Thus

¹ *Defense of Poesy* (ed. Cook); cf. Index under "Virgil."

² Quoted in *Dante in English Literature* by Paget Toynbee, I, 53.

³ *Advancement of Learning* (ed. Cook), 17.

William Webbe, who yields to none in his admiration of Virgil, writes in 1586 that "Spenser's fine poetical wit and most exquisite learning, as shown abundantly in the *Shepherd's Calendar*, was inferior to the works neither of Theocritus in Greeke nor Virgille in Latin whom he narrowly imitateth."¹ Other writers go still farther. Chapman trounces Scaliger roundly and turns the balance in favor of his beloved Homer. And Sir John Harington, in 1591, in his praise of Ariosto boldly declares that "whatsoever is praiseworthy in Virgil is plentifully to be found in Ariosto and some things that Virgil could not have, for the ignorance of the age he lived in." And yet it is Harington who writes the charming sentence: "But what need we further witnes, do we not make our children read Virgil commonly before they can understand it, as a testimonie that we do generally approve it? And yet we see old men study it, as a prooffe that they do specially admire it; so as one writes very pretily, that children do wade in Virgil, and yet strong men do swim in it."²

The poets and writers of Shakespeare's age, we may confidently assert, looked upon Virgil in a large and generous way. Of course only the fringe of the subject has here been touched; and the facts have been stated, not with the thought that the proper interpretation of them has been made, but that the varied extent of Virgil's influence may be understood. Sometimes we cannot help feeling that the great Elizabethan writers had the heart of the matter. Theirs was no rigid, cloistered classicism. They were primarily interested in their own language and in their own poetry; but they builded for the most part on the literatures of Greece and Rome. They had respect for the English tongue and for their own achievements. They wished English poetry to come to its own. But they found the best touchstone to be that poetry that had already won centuries of fame. They insisted on the worth of their own experience; and as the greatest classicist of them all, Ben Jonson, wrote: "It is true that the ancients opened the gates and made the way that went before us, but as guides, not commanders; *Non domini nostri, sed duces juere*. Truth lies open to all; it is no man's several. *Patet omnibus veritas; nondum est occupata.*"³

¹ In Smith, *op. cit.*, I, 232.

² *Ibid.*, II, 212.

³ *Timber* (ed. Schelling), 7.

And so the poets and prose writers of those days kept their minds open and their pens ready for inspiration from abroad or from olden times. They changed the motto on the coins of Castille until it read *plus ultra*. There was more beyond. And forth they went to discover it, whether it was land or poetry.¹ But they were ready to use the experience of the past, and especially they steered their craft often by the compass of that poet whom Bacon called "the chastest and the royalest that to the memory of man is known."

¹ Cf. the summary of the Elizabethan age given by Professor Wendell in his book on *The Temper of the Seventeenth Century in English Literature*, 44.